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Senator Says They Oppose His Bid to Chair Intelligence Panel

Durenberger Accuses Reagan Backers

By SARA FRITZ, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON—Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), an outspoken critic of covert U.S. aid to the rebels fighting the leftist Sandinista government of Nicaragua, said Friday that his views have sparked a campaign by President Reagan's conservative supporters to deprive him of the chairmanship of the powerful Senate Intelligence Committee.

In an interview, Durenberger said he expects to be chosen as chairman of the committee, which oversees U.S. intelligence-gathering operations around the globe, despite the opposition of conservatives. And, he added, he intends to use the position to oppose renewal of covert aid by the Reagan Administration to the Nicaraguan rebels, known as *contras*.

Under Senate rules, Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.), who will retire in 1987, must relinquish the committee chairmanship next year. So far, two other Republican senators—John H. Chafee of Rhode Island and Malcolm Wallop of Wyoming, both supporters of the Administration's position—have expressed interest in the post, which Goldwater has held since the intelligence panel was established in 1976.

But Durenberger, claiming the support of incoming Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.), said he is certain that neither Chafee nor Wallop can mount a serious challenge. He said Dole has also assured him that the President and Administration officials will remain neutral in any bid for the chairmanship—even though the future of their policy in Central America may be at stake.

According to Durenberger, most of his opponents are outsiders who misunderstand his position on covert aid.

"It's not being engineered by Wallop and Chafee, it's being engineered from the outside," he said. "Clearly, the right wing either doesn't understand my position or doesn't trust me in some larger sense. They assume I'm against *contras* and for the Sandinistas."

Durenberger said he views the fight against Nicaragua's Sandinista government as a political problem that cannot be solved through covert activity. Moreover, he suggested that the *contras*, who have representatives in Washington, have indicated that they understand his position and do not oppose his becoming chairman.

Staff Opposition

Congress previously appropriated \$14 million in aid to the *contras* for the current fiscal year, but Reagan cannot spend the money until he receives approval from both the Senate and House after submitting a report Feb. 28 that explains why the funds are needed.

According to Durenberger, his opposition is being led by Citizens for Reagan, an independent political action committee that supports the goals of the President. The group, he said, has organized a letter-writing campaign in his home state of Minnesota designed to persuade him to change his mind and support continued covert aid to the *contras*. Citizens for Reagan officials could not be reached for comment.

But Durenberger also accused some committee staff members of opposing him, saying they have been researching ways to block him from moving into the chairmanship.

One committee staff member, who refused to be identified, asserted that Durenberger "doesn't have an inside track" on the chair-

manship and added: "Some people wonder why he's doing so much talking about it."

Durenberger acknowledges that there is disagreement among members of the Senate over the rule that is responsible for a change in the committee leadership. Goldwater is stepping down as chairman and leaving the committee because the rules require a rotating membership.

Although the rule also technically prohibits Chafee and Wallop from continuing to serve on the committee, opponents of Durenberger—who is not covered by the rule—argue that the panel's other restrictions on membership frequently have been ignored. In addition, a special Senate committee on reorganization has recommended that the limit on committee tenure be extended.

Chafee and Wallop, who have more seniority on the intelligence panel than Durenberger, would be in line ahead of him for the chairmanship if the rule were ignored or changed—a move both Chafee and Wallop are known to support.

But Durenberger said Dole, who will be serving his first term as majority leader, has expressed a desire to avoid a battle over changing the rules. "Sen. Dole understands there is no point in rocking the boat—no point in starting out with a fight," he said.

Meanwhile, it was learned that Reagan's conservative allies had succeeded in scuttling the State Department's choice of L. Craig Johnstone as ambassador to Honduras. A source at the department said the Administration had decided against nominating Johnstone, 42, at the request of Rep. Jack Kemp (R-N.Y.), CIA Director William J. Casey and conservative groups.

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